Schools must have a strategic professional development plan that is meaningful to teachers and worth the time it takes away from other valuable activities.

When teachers help to define the topics and delivery methods, they become invested in the training.

Creative use of planning and duty periods frees teachers for student-related after-school activities.

School-based professional development is an important component of instructional leadership in every school, yet many schools struggle to define and maintain a systematic approach to staff development. The need to stay informed about current strategies and research that relates to effective instruction is not new to education leaders, but they are now under even more pressure to ensure that professional development activities are worth the time they take and are meaningful to all staff members.

One of the most cost-effective methods for making significant gains in student performance on standardized tests is providing teachers with better content knowledge and instructional methods to enhance the curriculum. Schools must make an effort to provide high-quality staff development activities to teachers—but how? Grafton Middle School in the York County (VA) School Division has used specific strategies to identify appropriate topics and respect the time constraints that exist within the school day. Grafton uses teacher input and school division goals to identify topics for staff development and uses time that is assigned to school duties and after-school meetings to present staff development activities to staff members.

Identifying Topics
Topics for staff development activities must address specific needs and be identified through various means. Three sources of data are used to identify topics at Grafton. The first source is test scores. Grafton has administered the Degrees of Reading Power test, which measures the comprehension of individual students, to all students and used the results to assess reading ability among the students.

In addition, the Virginia Standards of Learning tests provide Grafton with long-term information on the strengths and weaknesses in the curriculum. The data revealed something that was very important, but it wasn’t about the scores or the curricula. Instead, Grafton discovered that the teachers who participated in identifying specific strengths and weaknesses in the curriculum were much more interested and involved in staff development activities that addressed those issues.

The second source for identifying topics for staff development was a study of the school division’s goals and objectives. These goals are developed every two years and reflect systemwide areas of need. In many cases, those overarching needs may not apply to an individual school, but in some cases, they can provide structure and legitimacy for selecting a staff development activity. In York County, the systemwide goal of providing teachers with tools and knowledge to present the curriculum in meaningful ways permitted Grafton to provide training for differentiation, technology, and research-based instructional strategies without having to document those specific needs at the school level.

The last method Grafton used to identify topics for its professional development plan

Edward W. Holler
eholler@ycsd@york.va.us
Holler is the principal of Grafton Middle School in Yorktown, VA.

Sean Callender is the instructional supervisor for science in the Newport News (VA) School Division.

Candi Skinner is the coordinator of professional development for the York County (VA) School Division.
Well Spent

By Edward W. Holler, Sean Callender, and Candi Skinner

was a needs-assessment survey that all 65 of our teachers completed. The questions were designed to identify what teachers thought they needed to be more knowledgeable about and competent in to present the curriculum.

From these three sources, the elements of the 2005–06 staff development plan emerged: technology, differentiated instruction, a book study, a self-developed personal and professional growth goal, research-based instructional strategies, and new teacher training. Although this may seem like a tremendous amount of training, teachers need more skills and knowledge than ever to be effective. Strengthening teachers’ skills is an essential part of improving schools. Whitaker (2006) suggests that there are only two ways to improve schools: get better teachers and improve the teachers you have. Hoyle, Bjork, Collier, and Glass (2005) add that professional development should be viewed as a continual process that can move an organization toward a vision. In addition, the National Staff Development Council has developed standards for quality professional development that have moved schools away from ineffective “one-shot” workshops and toward a sustained, systematic effort. (These standards are available at www.nsdc.org/standards.)

Once the topics were identified, members of the school were asked to develop a plan to address the topics with the staff. The technology specialist led the efforts to integrate technology into the curriculum, the assistant principals became the staff development leaders for differentiation, each administrator became a book study group leader, two teachers received additional training and became leaders of the research-based instructional strategies model, and a veteran teacher led the new teacher mentor program.

Finding Time

Once the school community knew what to focus on, it turned its attention to how to accomplish it. It became apparent that Grafton needed to find creative ways for teachers to participate in meaningful activities that focused on growth and development. The school community did not want more of the short-lived, one-shot professional development that did not sustain change in teachers, so a new goal for the staff development plan was adopted: to improve teacher participation and involvement in hands-on, make-and-take products that teachers use in their work soon after participating in the activity. After-school training did not produce the desired results.

One of the most cost-effective methods for making significant gains in student performance on standardized tests is providing teachers with better content knowledge and instructional methods to enhance the curriculum.
because teachers were reluctant participants. The school community knew that it had to develop a systematic plan to provide time for staff development during the school day.

All core teachers at Grafton have an individual planning period and a duty period during the seven-period school day. The duty period is expected to have a strong academic focus. (See Holler, Skinner, & Callender, 2006, for information about using the duty period effectively.) The plan permits staff development leaders to provide training to small groups of teachers during their duty periods. By consolidating training sessions to match up with the core-teacher duty periods, training is provided to groups of teachers five times a day.

Twice a month, this plan is used to train teachers on one of the elements that were identified as professional development goals. Teachers still meet with all their classes but instead of going to a duty assignment that day, they go to professional development. The school provides substitutes for the trainers and an extra substitute to cover classes when a teacher’s duty period cannot fit into the schedule or to cover any related-arts teachers who attend the training. This schedule enables us to provide training four times each month on a selected research-based instructional strategy: Teachers attend a session during their duty period instead of attending their regular academic duty assignment. Related-arts teachers attend during their planning time or when a substitute is available to cover their classes. The training is important, so all teachers are included.

Each month, a new high-yield strategy is selected. The professional development for the high-yield strategy rotates through the different trainers on a weekly schedule. During the first week, the teacher trainers introduce a research-based instructional strategy. In the second week, the assistant principals train teachers to differentiate the strategy in the classroom. During the third week, the technology coordinator trains teachers to incorporate technology using the strategy. In the last session of the month, the teacher trainers provide a summative make-and-take activity using the instructional strategy that the core and noncore teachers can immediately use in their classrooms.

Teachers’ response to this extensive staff development plan has been very positive because the training offers information and practical applications for topics that teachers helped select and see as useful. The funding provided to secure substitutes to support staff development has enabled Grafton to obtain results that we could not expect through an after-school program. Teachers appear to be more willing and involved in the training because they are being trained by colleagues and peers and have support right here in school. This is the second year of this plan, and the topics and schedule for next year are being planned.

After-school training is still conducted for the new teacher mentoring program and for the book study. These programs are accepted to a greater degree because other training is conducted on school time. Teachers also participate in division-level training as it is available and attend professional conferences as funds permit.
With this systematic approach to the professional development program, Grafton is able to maintain a high level of energy in the teachers. It is also able to provide support for numerous after-school programs and tutoring sessions because teachers are free from after-school staff development activities. Teachers are able to make better connections with their students, which in turn motivates students to perform at a higher level in the classroom.

Professional development is the key to the success of a school. The challenges are to overcome the time factor and to provide meaningful activities that teachers accept. With the systematic approach to professional development outlined here, Grafton has been able to accomplish both.

References